

## A Life Well Played

**A**lthough she just turned 95, Florence “Buddy” Welles shows no signs of slowing down. Whether recalling her past or playing her 102-year-old Steinway grand piano, this accomplished musician and patron of the arts appears to be in her prime.

“Long before my feet could touch the pedals, my mother had me at the piano learning to play,” reminisces Welles, who radiates the energy of a woman half her age. “I guess I started piano lessons at about age seven. Of course this was a long time ago,” she smiles, “before radio and television. It might seem strange now that I never heard Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, or any of the other great composers of the piano until I played them myself.”

*Buddy Welles*  
Photo by Jeff Greene



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Buddy Welles

Mastering the piano is just one of many of her triumphs. She and her late husband, Ralph, led a very “entertaining” life. In the 1940s the couple founded the Palo Alto Community Theater. Ralph Welles served as theater director and Buddy Welles was the musical director, rehearsal pianist,

and choreographer – often putting in very long hours, and loving every minute of it.

“When you work in the theater,” Welles explains, “you’ve got to do anything that’s called for. It’s a wonderful experience for life.”

After moving to the Central Coast, the Welleses worried about a lack of culture, but soon came to realize “how fortunate our part of California is to have Clifton Swanson [chair of the Music Department] here to organize everything,” says Welles. “He’s responsible for getting the Music Department going at Cal Poly and for bringing the Mozart Festival to San Luis Obispo. That never would have happened without him.”

After her husband died in 1988, Buddy Welles established the Ralph E. and Florence B. Welles Scholarship in Music.

“Ralph and I didn’t have time to even think of having a family of our own,” she says. “And so I thought I would like to do something in his memory and my memory to help kids who are musically inclined.”

Welles has also recently pledged another \$75,000 from her estate for the Florence “Buddy” Welles Piano Studio, which will be housed in the yet-to-be-remodeled music/theatre/dance facility.

“Clif Swanson showed me the plans for the new building and pointed out a small practice studio,” Welles says. She decided then to help fund the project. “When Clif said that the practice studio could bear my name, I thought, ‘That would be great, because, by gosh, you’ve got to practice!’ If you miss a day, you know it; if you miss two days, anyone listening knows it,” she laughs.